

Behind the shooting of Papua New Guinea student protesters

By Peter Symonds
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Heavily-armed police in the Papua New Guinea capital of Port Moresby last Wednesday opened fire on hundreds of protesting university students with live ammunition, injuring nearly 40, several seriously. The police crackdown followed weeks of student protests, including widespread class boycotts, at the University of Papua New Guinea that were joined by students in other parts of the country.

The students were preparing to march to the PNG parliament to support plans by the official opposition to move a no-confidence vote in Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and his government. The police shooting, which was undoubtedly given the green light at the top level of the state apparatus, was aimed at not only suppressing the student protests but intimidating layers of working people impacted by the government's harsh austerity measures.

The parliamentary opposition headed by Don Polye has sought on several occasions to bring down the government on the issue of corruption. O'Neill has engaged in a series of manoeuvres since 2014 to avoid being arrested and tried over allegations that he gave instructions for payments worth about \$US22 million to a legal firm for unauthorised invoices. Despite repeated opposition demands, O'Neill has refused to stand aside.

Like the opposition, key student leaders have sought to narrowly focus on O'Neill's alleged corruption and supported no confidence motions to the exclusion of broader issues. PNG, which depends heavily on energy and mineral exports, has been hard hit by falling commodities prices, forcing the government to seek loans and slash social spending. Many public servants have not been paid. Deep cutbacks have been made to public health and education, which were already grossly underfunded.

By making corruption the central issue, Polye is seeking to cover up his own record, as O'Neill's treasurer until 2014, in imposing the burden of the worsening economic crisis onto the backs of workers and the rural poor. As the financial turmoil has deepened, he has criticised the government for failing to take "urgent belt-tightening measures."

Corruption scandals are invariably an expression of deep divisions within the ruling elite over more fundamental issues. In PNG's case, there has been an ongoing fracturing of the political establishment in the four decades since the end of Australian colonial rule in 1975. PNG politics is dominated by political formations based on regional, local and linguistic divisions that have no policies other than to benefit the tiny competing elites they represent.

PNG, like other countries throughout the Asia Pacific, has been caught up in the sharpening geo-political tensions fuelled by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and military preparations for war with China. As Obama was formally announcing the "pivot" in the Australian parliament in November 2011, an extraordinary constitutional crisis was unfolding in PNG following the ouster of Michael Somare as prime minister and installation of O'Neill.

Somare's "look north" orientation to seek aid and investment from China had raised growing concerns in Canberra and Washington. His government gave the go-ahead for the \$1.5 billion Chinese-owned Ramu nickel-copper mine. He further angered the Australian government by refusing to accept Australian Federal Police (AFP) "advisers" in strategic positions within the PNG police force as well as other Australian officials in senior legal, economic and other sensitive posts.

When the Supreme Court ruled in December 2011 that O'Neill's installation was unconstitutional and that Somare remained prime minister, O'Neill ignored the country's top court. The standoff between Somare and O'Neill threatened to tear the state apparatus apart as the two men appointed their own officials, including police commissioners and defence force commanders. The crisis only ended after O'Neill agreed to call fresh elections, out of which his party emerged as the largest and formed government.

O'Neill signalled his reorientation away from Beijing and toward Canberra and Washington when he first took office in August 2011. He agreed to allow AFP and Australian military personnel into PNG in advisory roles. He also reached a deal with the then Labor government in Canberra to reopen the Manus Island detention centre to imprison refugees trying to reach Australia, in return for an increase in Australian foreign aid.

On paper, O'Neill has a commanding parliamentary majority of about 100 in the country's 111-seat parliament. His coalition, however, is highly unstable and based on various inducements, such as the allocation of constituency funds. While he has managed to inflate the size of his own People's National Congress Party from 27 to about 50 seats by enticing defections from other parties, the ruling coalition involves key rivals, including Somare's National Alliance Party.

Somare, even though nominally aligned with the government, criticised the police shootings last week as "inexcusable" and indicated his support for the students. But neither Somare's National Alliance Party nor other government allies have indicated that they intend to desert the ruling coalition. Last week's attempt to pass a vote of no confidence failed. Behind the scenes, manoeuvring has begun for elections scheduled for next year.

Frictions have developed between O'Neill and Canberra over a series of issues, including his decision to direct some Australian advisers to leave last December. Nevertheless, his government has retained Canberra's backing throughout the current crisis. In response to last week's shootings, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop called for "calm." Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull rang O'Neill to offer assistance, but was politely declined.

It is not difficult to image a completely different scenario if O'Neill no longer enjoyed Canberra's support. Not only would the corruption allegations be used to paint a picture of a dysfunctional government, but the shooting of unarmed student protesters would be seized upon to denounce O'Neill in the blackest of terms, paving the way for his removal.

Canberra's attitude is summed up in a short comment by former long-time Australian Broadcasting Corporation correspondent in PNG, Sean Dorney, in the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*. The headline said it all: "PNG shootings are not a Tiananmen moment." In other words, given that initial reports of four students being shot dead were incorrect, the police brutality and blatant abrogation of democratic rights was nothing to get worked up about.

The Australian government is clearly concerned at the ongoing political instability in PNG, which is the largest of the Pacific island states and is strategically placed just to the north of Australia. Canberra has previously indicated that it would intervene, including militarily, in the event of a crisis in PNG and may well be attempting to manipulate events behind the scenes at present. An obvious question needs to be asked: what were the AFP's embedded advisers doing last Wednesday as PNG police shot at protesting students?

The latest crisis in PNG is a harbinger of the worsening social and economic crisis and sharpening geo-political tensions wracking countries throughout the region, particularly the small, vulnerable island states of the South West Pacific. The police shootings are a warning of the draconian measures that will be used by the local ruling elites to suppress any resistance to their agenda.

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